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### Deposited in DRO:

28 April 2015

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Campbell, B. (2014) 'Culture on display : metropolitan multiculturalism and the Manchester Nepal festival.', in Facing globalization in the Himalayas : belonging and the politics of the self. New Delhi: Sage, pp. 209-232. Governance, conflict, and civic action. (5).

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.uk.sagepub.com/books/Book241965tabview=title>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

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## **‘Culture on Display: metropolitan multiculturalism and the Manchester Nepal festival’**

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In 1998 I saw an article in the Kathmandu Post reporting a visit to Nepal by the Lord Mayor of Manchester. It was part of the build-up to a festival to be held in Manchester that would celebrate Nepali culture and promote understanding and trade. This took me by surprise as I had been living in the Manchester area for several years but had not heard about this planned event. The first of these festivals had taken place in 1996. By the time of the next one, in 2004, I had been given a seat on the festival’s organising committee.

This chapter discusses two of these festivals, and raises issues of belonging to think about processes that can be seen at work in the presentation of Nepali culture both for the diaspora community, and for others to enjoy in celebratory mode. There is a kind of festive belonging involved in the way such an iconic place as Manchester’s neo-gothic town hall is transformed into a partial simulacrum of Kathmandu’s tourist bazaar area Thamel. The colours and energy of the stalls, the photographs of the classic landmarks, and the performances of song and dance announce an unmistakable presence of Nepalis, charmingly packaged up for consumers of cultural diversity. The visually impressive combination of retail items, trays of dal bhat, and themed programme of events demonstrates how Nepalis can recreate a version of ‘belonging’ while abroad. This makes an impact both on the participants who reconfirm a belonging in one way or another to Nepal, and on the curious members of the society in which Nepalis have settled, who witness the shop-window assemblage of a culture on display – in a post-industrial city in northern England.

Is this, though, a culture from ‘afar’, or something that is partially formed by realities of belonging nearer at hand? Where is the civic centre of gravity in the affective networks of intentional recognition among the participants? The Mancunian Nepali families have children who all speak with the fast, friendly wit-tinged dialect of the locals. They perform national distinctiveness at the festival, within a series of similar events, when the Irish celebration of St Patrick’s day, Chinese New Year, and the ‘Asian’ mela take their turn to hold the attention of the city. The Nepali festival in other words belongs comfortably within the mainstream self-image and performance of a multi-cultural metropolis. However, there are ‘back stage’ incidents discussed in this chapter, which demonstrate how the ‘front stage’ performances are controlled and contested in terms of what is deemed permissible for public airing, and what possibilities for viewing Nepal are foreclosed. Being Nepalis in the UK, and marking out performative public space to put across the attractiveness, tenacity and liveliness of Nepali culture for the new environment of belonging, requires putting together a staged version of what can be considered typical and appropriate elements of life in Nepal. Of necessity, this is made up

from a combination of materials and skills available already among the UK and Manchester diaspora, with some special display items, racks of eye-catching and relatively cheap imports of Thamel bazaar clothing and other produce, and select persons brought in from Kathmandu to boost the authenticity of connectedness to the national home. The whole cultural package is given a seal of approval with an ambassadorial visit, to encourage tourism and investment.

The professionalisation required for staging multicultural events calls on organisational values that run counter to the energetic good will of the mass of voluntary contributors. Although Nepali culture indeed has to be packaged up and commodified in the process of making a festival and providing the public with an experience of varied kinds of consumption that is accessible and enjoyable, the commodity logic has disturbing effects. Professional etiquette, standards, and forms of organisation are aspired to for an event of this type, but there are problems where claims to professional levels of remuneration are refused, and voluntary giving 'for the good of Nepal' becomes a rhetoric heard in inverse proportion to the budget for the whole enterprise. The less money available, the more pressure to work for the flag.

Gilroy's (2004) discussion of multicultural capitalist society provides some inspiration for understanding the context of Nepali culture on display in Manchester. He reflects on the role that consuming difference has in late modernity, as compared to old ideas of race. Cultural diversity has become a positive value in UK national and metropolitan public policy since the adoption of integrationist models for immigrant minority groups, giving a new arena for state legitimacy (Favell 2003), but Gilroy is concerned with changes in how capitalism reshapes the ideas of embodied difference by which people now fashion their bodies, their selves, and their stylistic allegiances to communities of belonging. Cultural diversity is prominently displayed on supermarket shelves and offers attractive variety for consumption. Gilroy explains how systems of raciological discourse have shifted from colonial economies of racial divisions of labour, (recall how Gurkhas were recruited from 'martial tribes and races'), to difference being expressed by reference to optional consumption styles, which can offer purchasable parts of otherness, in kinds of dietary taste, musical and hairstyle choices among other potential choices. The case of the engagement with cultural difference enabled by the Nepal festival makes use of 'dominant' municipal registers of cultural affiliation and belonging, with some 'demotic' retail pleasure too (Baumann 1997).

A tailored package of multicultural consumption was fashioned for the citizens of Manchester to come and appreciate a flavour of Nepali food, song, dance, handicrafts and history. This calls on an understanding of belonging that operationalises aspired links of mutuality, and attachment in a kind of *jatra* congregation, of formal and informal civic commitment shown by the public that includes British people who have links to Nepal, as ex-Gurkhas, volunteers, mountaineers and spiritual seekers. The hats, jackets or clothing made in Nepal stand out from the local shopping centre's offerings, and wearing them can be seen as a badge of boutique niche market access to cultural diversity. The Nepal-branded produce evokes an invitation to the British public as Gilroy argues for black cultural affiliation being indexed by David Beckham's choices of jeans and dark glasses.

Being Nepali abroad finds corresponding movements from the host community of recognising aspired-to relationships of conviviality and mutual participation in a performance of culture. The mutualisms at work in the relations between diaspora organisations and the local government for enhanced legitimacy (as actors for multicultural citizenship), are clearly of a different kind from those between the festival stall-holders and the curious viewing publics. Participation in the acts of performative cultural distinctiveness rubs off on the sense of belonging as a guest in a staged arena of shared community space. This invites formal politeness and corresponding diplomatic gestures of greeting, gift giving as well as more cash-based exchanges that contribute to the facilitating cosmopolitan ethos that celebrates diversity of this kind. The festival gives an occasion for self-identifying multicultural citizens to present themselves. In important ways this builds on networks of jobs and entitlement in a 'multicultural sector' of public life, so that people working with immigrant groups, refugees and asylum-seekers would be attracted to this kind of event. Events such as the Notting Hill carnival have popularised festivals as a vehicle for celebrating contemporary diversity that also evoke historical continuities of festive traditions in the UK (Olwig 1993).

There are a number of rhetorical tropes by which the Nepalis in the UK can exercise claims of relationship to the British public. Foremost among these is the Gurkha connection, which can inspire cross-generational sentiments of solidarity, especially among older people who have served in the armed forces or whose parents would have told them about Gurkha bravery in the war zones of Burma and Malaysia. This is a historical relationship that can trigger emotive bonds of association that evoke mutuality through episodes of shared historical interdependence, even if a British person has never been to Nepal. Other pathways of mutuality can be built up between Nepalis and the British locals that work through more personalized recognition. Individuals who have been transformed by mountaineering or trekking holidays in Nepal. Shangri-la imagery of wondrous experiences and landscapes typically feature in the British visitor's account. People who have been to Nepal as volunteers or workers in health and development, conservation and education give other reasons for their affection or empathy with Nepalis who have come to the UK. Nepali interpersonal etiquette is both ritualized and relaxed with regard to strangers, and shows a genius for making foreigners feel welcome in Nepal (by personal warmth and attention, bestowal of kin terms for inclusion in domestic circles, and intimacy with a unique place). The festival in Manchester works to trigger again such sentiments, and to deploy orientalisising far-away, magical land imagery to play into the register of integrationist multicultural policy that pretends to facilitate an encompassing logic of civic diversity inclusion (Baumann 2005).

A further sense in which the Manchester event is a phenomenon that is to do with the near, rather than coming from afar, is that the Nepalis who do attend the festivals (and the other more regular gatherings of the Himalayan Yeti Association in UK), are the Nepalis who have 'arrived' and are happy to be seen, as opposed to those who do not want to be conspicuous, or to have their rights for being in the UK possibly brought into question. In this sense the festival marks the belonging in Manchester (or the UK more generally) of those who want to distinguish themselves from Nepalis who are present, but without permanent rights or legitimate paperwork. This is important in relation to the question put

by the editors of this volume “When do we belong?”, and in staging an event of belonging, it is worth noting that internally differentiated markings of presence and absence are produced by the public display of belonging.

Nepalese migration to the UK has consisted in the main of doctors and nurses, restaurant owners and workers, students, and spouses of British men and women who met in Nepal. Since 2009 there has been an increased right for ex-Gurkha soldiers to live in Britain<sup>1</sup>. The 2001 census of 30,000 people of Nepali origin is considered an underestimate, and the likely figure is more probably around 100,000 (Adhikari 2012). Core concentrations are in Reading and outer London, I have even attended Dasain gatherings in rural Lincolnshire. One estimate is there are roughly one hundred organisations formed by Nepalis in the UK. In Manchester the restaurants are the most visible community, and actively enhance the diversity of South Asian cuisines available in the city. There are half a dozen very fine such restaurants (Rajdoot, Great Kathmandu, Jai Kathmandu, Gurkha Grill, Nepalese Village, Nepalese Kitchen) with others rapidly building reputations. Speaking with some former students at Manchester University, they told me there was an insider/outsider barrier depending on visa status that they had encountered when they had attempted to make contact with the resident Nepali community. As I make plain in later sections, there is a Bahun-Chhetri-Newar predominance in both the organisational life of the Nepali Associations in the UK, and in the cultural forms with which they seek to represent Nepal.

### **Methodology and Ethics**

I am writing as a participant in the social interactions and cultural production that this chapter is concerned with. This does not mean I believe I have done ‘proper’ fieldwork with the Nepali community in Manchester. Rather than announcing myself as an anthropologist at work, I have been an anthropologist who happens to be a member of the festival organising committee. Now, there is a twist to this position of distance. For several years I have held a certain theory about the British middle classes. To understand who they are, anthropologically, ‘in the round’, as social actors expressing their selective individualism, it is not enough to see them at home or at work, but also *in committee*: in evenings spent with cups of tea and biscuits, agendas, apologies and AOBs. With the ordered environment of a chairperson, a treasurer, a membership list, a newsletter, and a cause, the British middle class person emerges as a social phenomenon, voluntaristically embracing civic responsibilities. This is a function that the habitus of the Manchester-resident Newar community seems to be ‘at home’ with too.

I have witnessed the inside of committees from village planning response groups, to organic gardeners, cooperative housing projects, anti-racism organisations, and residential groups for maintenance of unadopted roads. While the context of a committee

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<sup>1</sup> As a historical footnote, it is interesting to look back on the fact that political coalition organised for the Gurkhas’ right to live in the UK in April 2009, was the first parliamentary vote in the UK that brought the Conservative and Liberal Democrat leaders David Cameron and Nick Clegg together with a successful outcome, after which they went on the next year to displace Gordon Brown’s Labour Party from government.

form enables a certain kind of person-in-public to come through, and affords a stage on which matters of importance play around in the personal chemistry of the committee members, there are notably British rules of etiquette and procedure. One of these is not to get too personal and overstep that sensitive frontier marked as encroaching into another's privacy beyond the context of relevance for the given committee's assembling. As a committee member for the festival, I have observed the meetings, attended related 'social functions', but have remained within that persona. So I have not done fieldwork in the way I would expect to if I was on a funded project to research the Nepali diaspora, checking facts from different angles, running in-depth interviews, taking up other kinds of roles than committee member, and inserting myself in the flow of events and relationships necessary for a 'holistic' fieldwork experience.

### **The Manchester Network**

I had come to know some of the Nepali restaurant owners, workers and their families, in part due to the proximity of the Great Kathmandu restaurant to the former home of Tim Ingold, where anthropology department seminar speakers were often entertained in the mid 1990s. I attended the occasional New Year, and Dasain-Tihar social events organised by the Himalayan Yeti Association held at the Manchester Police sports centre<sup>2</sup>. The Himalayan Yeti Association is organisationally based in Manchester where Dasain-Tihar (as one event) and Nepali New Year are celebrated, but it holds further meetings at different locations around the country where groups of Nepalis have settled. I heard of the Nepali language lessons run at a library on Saturday mornings. Then a student at Manchester began working on an MA thesis about the royal family massacre, and she drew me into an evening at one of the restaurants in south Manchester to help launch fund-raising for the forthcoming festival. Here I met the dynamic impresario of the Manchester festival, Puspa Shrestha. Originally from Pokhara, he has lived in Manchester for thirty years. He has an Irish wife, and a daughter. It was his realisation that many of the children born to Nepali parents were likely to lose touch with Nepali language competence, that had motivated him to start the language classes. The evening I met him, Puspa told me I should "give something back to Nepal", and hoped I would join the committee. An evening of entertainment was provided to the invited clientele, including dances by Charan Pradhan<sup>3</sup> who had studied performing arts at a college in Oldham, Greater Manchester, and to add a multi-cultural flavour, a local woman gave a belly-dance show.

When the 2004 Nepal-Himalayan Festival organising committee met for the first time on a Saturday afternoon in a room at Withington library, a mixed gathering of members of the Nepali community and other invited volunteers were present. The story of the previous festivals was told, and roles within the committee were discussed. The

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<sup>2</sup> These have moved to the local Irish Community Centre after the police introduced a rule that any food served on the premises had to be provided by the police's regular caterers. One event when the meal of rice and curry English style was offered up was enough to cause the relocation to the dal bhat-friendly venue of the Irish community.

<sup>3</sup> Having heard of me, Charan had searched me out, and found my house in the Pennine hills simply by asking in the local town where 'the man from Nepal' lived.

organisational core for the Manchester festivals grew out of the language classes and the group of families that sent children to them. Puspa Shrestha already had some contacts within Manchester City Council in the field of education, and his welcome multicultural face within the predominantly white municipal establishment had prompted encouragement to put on a festival. The first festival had required a strong coalition of Nepalis and non-Nepalis to help put all the necessary elements together organisationally (with advertising and marketing to potential audiences), and in such a way that the programme of events would draw a wider public interest than the appeal of Nepal alone would achieve. Therefore the *relationship* of British and Nepalis became a common element. The 1996 festival relied heavily on the enthusiasm and public celebrity of Mike Harding to generate interest. Well-known as ‘The Rochdale Cowboy’<sup>4</sup>, for many years he had a TV show of folk and country music (and is still a DJ on BBC radio 2). He had done a trek in Nepal and spoke of its transformative effect on him. He and Sir Edmund Hillary as the main attractions, with a spectacular formation march of the Gurkha brigade band provided a pull for the wider British public to come and make the first festival a success. The main figure to attract the public at the next festival was Doug Scott, the first British person to climb Everest, on Chris Bonnington’s 1975 expedition.

In the first meeting I attended of organising committee roles were assigned for president, treasurer, secretary, and for the specific task areas of stalls, fashion show, cultural programme, speakers, films, marketing and publicity. After a good turn-out at the first meeting, subsequent committee meetings, held approximately once a month for the year running up to the festival were less well attended. Attendance rose again closer to the event as stress levels increased. Most of the song and dance programme consists of performances from Manchester-based families. In 2004 and 2008 the band of the brigade of Gurkhas was not available due to commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Several of the committee’s organisational positions were taken by ‘British’ people from the Manchester region, who have developed connections with Nepal and the UK diaspora, and they frequently have other family members who have worked in Nepal. One of these is Dave, who I had supervised for his MA on the Bhutan refugee situation, and who had got a job with Oldham town council offering various kinds of provision for people seeking asylum in the UK. Another ‘British’ member of the committee is the formidable Linda Sherpa, who spends her time partly in Kathmandu, partly in the high Pennine valley of Rossendale. Her main role is to coordinate the exhibits coming from Kathmandu, including photographs, paintings and textiles. Others share in the sense of Nepal having affected them powerfully in one way or another, and have ongoing connections with organisations and individuals from Nepal apart from the festival. The very demanding role of festival organising committee secretary has always been held by an English woman. Both the festivals I participated in struggled to find funding, and the Himalayan-Yeti Association has had to subsidise the event.

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<sup>4</sup> Rochdale is one of the industrial mill-towns set beside the Pennine hills in Greater Manchester

On any one occasion, the committee normally consisted of roughly half Nepali and half British people and rarely numbered more than ten. It has run with an ethos of inclusivity and welcome openness to newcomers who have any appropriate idea or skill to offer for the festival. It needs an informality suited to voluntary organisations, with the chairman occasionally having to use firmer nationalist rhetorical methods to improve attendance or require people do the tasks they said they would. The festival committee is conscious of different communities it needs to mobilise: the Manchester based Nepalis and UK-wide Nepalis, and the different kinds of interest groups in the Northwest of England who appreciate different elements of the festival programme – mountaineers, back-packer travellers, Buddhists, teachers, volunteer organisations. In the lead up to the festival several meetings need to be held in the Town Hall itself to map out activities and coordinate with relevant staff from the city council. Nepalis on the committee included in 2008 the son of the owner of one of the most popular Nepalese restaurants who took on the role of website manager for the festival, and restored it after a hacker attack. Others are teachers, doctors, nurses, accountants, and travel firm workers. A majority are Newar speakers.

### **Culture and Capital**

Funding for the festival is always a difficult issue. A certain amount comes from the city council, which also provides the impressive venue of the town hall, but roughly £40,000 is necessary to cover all expenses: paying travel fees and accommodation for speakers and performers, providing audio-visual technical support (all the production and technical costs on the festival site in 2008 came to £13,100), paying for publicity in appropriate media, designing and distributing leaflets and posters, and covering costs of telephone calls, stationary and postage incurred by committee members. Money comes in from businesses and charity organisations that run stalls, and a charge has been made for tickets to hear the ‘big name’ speakers.<sup>5</sup> If ‘Himalayan’ celebrities can be lured to the event, big attendances can be planned for. In 2008 Reinhold Messner, Chris Bonnington, Michael Palin, Roy Lancaster, George Schaller, and the Dalai Lama unfortunately all had schedules over a year in advance, which made them too busy to commit to the festival. A ‘public relations’ company had joined the committee by the autumn of 2007, and had found a celebrity as the potential main attraction for the Saturday evening: the comedian Rowland Rivron who had appeared in a TV show ‘Extreme Celebrity Detox’ set in a Himalayan location. This had also featured the late Tony Wilson (of Manchester’s Hacienda, and Factory Records), and Magenta Divine of the Rough Guide show. The PR company withdrew due to a break-down in communications with the committee secretary who considered them incompetent. They had booked an interview for the cable TV ‘Channel M’ on the wrong day prior to the festival, and had failed to place advertisements on time in the regional magazines. (In fact their main contribution of finding a Saturday main speaker had fallen foul of rights to use footage from the TV programme he had appeared in). Prashanta Tamang, the young policeman from Darjeeling and winner of the Indian Pop Idol competition, was going to be in the UK at

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<sup>5</sup> This was dropped at the 2008 event, as tickets cost money to run, and are difficult to control in the busy event.



the time of the festival making three appearances. He would have been a huge draw, but his PR quoted a performance fee of £10,000.

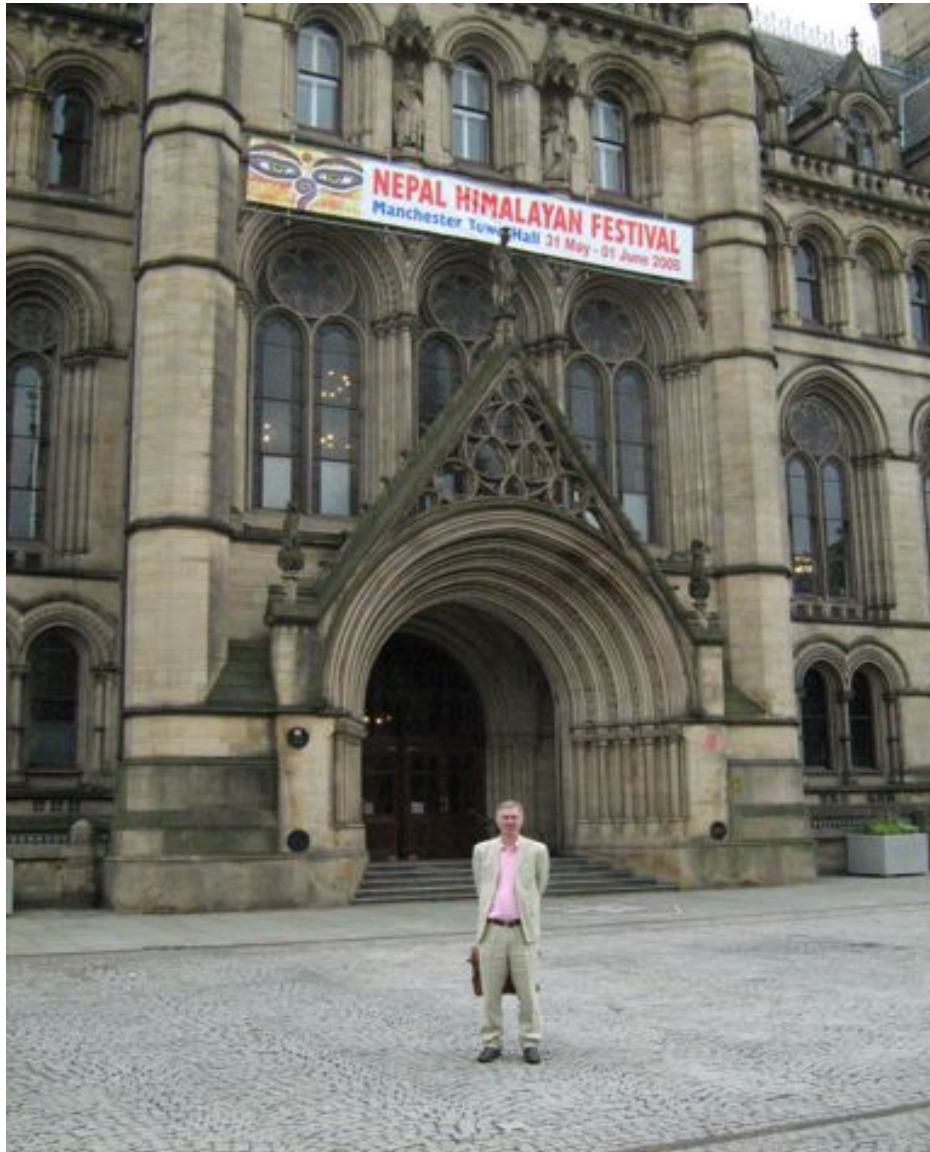
For the 2004 festival funding bids were put in to arts, and ‘community and diversity’ organisations, as well as the national lottery. None of these was successful. The evidence for competent account keeping from previous festivals may have been an issue. For the 2008 festival, planning started in early 2007, but even by October 2007, when the deadlines for many funding bodies fall, a convincing set of accounts still had not materialised from the previous festival. This was despite talk of “never again” from non-Nepalis, who held secretarial roles through the previous events, and although there was much exhortation that a more professional stance would be taken for 2008, the principal source of accounting information within the town hall network could not be located. He had played a key role in liaising between the festival organisation and the city council, and had the most officially prepared set of figures. His previous role within the city council set-up had since been ‘out-sourced’, so he had become freelance and therefore his contact details had altered. Other advice was taken that sponsorship rather than grants should be targeted, but despite applications made to Manchester airport, and companies located in and around the city (Qatar Airlines, Manchester Evening News), Nepali companies (e.g. Khukri Beer), and NGOs such as Water AID, the only bid that had been successful was to a performing arts source to help pay flights for a musical group from Kathmandu.

The festival organisation was not completely without support. There was the city council to which a bid for £18,000 was being prepared, and the Himalayan Yeti Association’s executive committee had put up £10,000 as a figure to draw on as running costs for getting the event moving. The Asian mela receives £16,000 every year from the city council, and does not even put on the range of programme the Nepali festival offers, so some of the Nepalis claim they are due a similar figure. Bargaining is conducted to ensure no disadvantage occurs. In 2004 the European election clashed with the festival dates, and being therefore deprived of use of the Great Hall within the building, where voting papers are counted and kept, the committee made known its sense of grievance, that the festival would be unduly deprived of the key venue as a result. A claim for compensation was even contemplated, until the main debating chamber and other considerations were made available to improve matters.

In March 2008, less than three months from the festival, it still looked like the only funding was £5,000 coming from the city council. At this point corporate contacts within the Nepali community were approached. The Nepal embassy was to be asked for assistance too.

At the April meeting, late in the day, I suggested I could ask Canon (who lent the cameras used in my recent film project) if they would be interested to sponsor the festival. The committee members rapidly set the price at £20,000 for the whole event to be named ‘The Canon Nepal-Himalaya Festival’, that would go out in all the publicity and be emblazoned on a banner in front of the Town Hall for two weeks. It transpired this was too little time for Canon to respond.

With so little money to play with, up to the last minute bookings at hotels were being cancelled, or relocated to cheaper venues.



Prof Michael Hutt at Manchester Town Hall, St. Peter's Square

### **The Diaspora Context of Culture on Display**

The festival's cultural content reflects locally available talents and the cultural preferences of the organising committee, which tend to serve dominant rather than demotic diaspora demographics and registers of cultural life. Asylum seekers and transient kitchen workers are not greatly in evidence at the events hosted by the

Himalayan Yeti Association. None of my Tamang contacts in the UK have ever felt inclined to come to the events organised in Manchester. One of them, who is working as kitchen staff in an English east coast holiday town, is happy enough to be taken for a Chinese there, and not to worry about correcting others' ideas of his national origins. Conditions of work for many Nepalis are extremely demanding. Talking with some of the restaurant workers has impressed on me the long hours of toil involved: "People in Nepal think if you have work in UK you will be happy. They have no idea how much you have to work, only work."

Doctors and teachers are prominent among the professional Nepalis living in the UK who belong to the association. Others work in IT, and the restaurant business. I have not done research to see if marriages have a greater frequency among UK-resident Nepalis, or whether as Werbner (1999) found for Pakistani families in Manchester, sub-continental marriage partners are preferred.

The Association has evolved an annual calendar for gathering together at different times. Apart from the Nepali new year and dasain-tihar celebrations, there is a growing taste for British-styled activities like the summer picnics held at Tatton Country Park in Cheshire, when family outdoor entertainments include egg-and-spoon races, and weekend walking holidays in the Lake District, or Wales. Visits to the hills and mountains are written up as 'making a successful attempt' on mount Snowdon. Reading the report of these trekking expeditions in the newsletter *Namaste* is like a playful transposition of tropic roles in the Himalayan trekking literature (and given Ortner's (1999) historical analysis of Nepalis challenging the expeditionary hierarchies, this makes logical sense) – with committee member Mark as the trusty local 'guide'. In the Peak District they even find a hill village to visit named Ilam.

The children of Nepalis who migrated in the 1970s and 1980s have been thoroughly socialised into the ways of the ritual cycle of putting culture on display:

"we have all performed our national service" (dancing on stage over the years)



First dance of the New Year cultural programme at Police Sports Hall, South Manchester

There is an almost *swadeshi* pride in the ability of the UK-based Nepalis to put on a convincing show of national culture without needing to fly plane-loads of performers from Kathmandu, which is anyway an unreliable method for presenting Nepali culture abroad. As the committee president put it in relation to the festival:

“you can never rely on Nepal for providing contributors and stalls. You can only rely on what we can provide from this end”.

There are difficulties over who can travel, and for who can qualify as a transnational cultural actor (Ong 1999). The 2008 festival secured funds for tickets for the musicians mentioned earlier, but the UK visa-issuing office in New Delhi only agreed to issue visas just to stop our unrelenting committee member’s daily telephone calls. The visa office had initially turned down the applications, despite no evidence of previous untoward visa experience from the applicants.

On the other hand, the local density of Nepalis in the catering business close to Manchester presented a dilemma for choosing which business would provide the *dal bhat tarkari* for the festival. Sensitive diplomacy was required in deciding who was to get the contract. This was one of the few roles undertaken by Nepalis, which would have to be professionalized, as it needed an efficient service to take money from the public, rather than be managed through volunteers. At the same time, the Nepali restaurant community who did not get the contract were not to be let off lightly. They were being systematically

reminded to be present at the festival when their restaurants were closed, and they were off work. A full turn out was required.

The president took considerable risks in calculating who was valuable to the cultural programme, to such an extent that requests for professional terms of remuneration were refused, but not so as to offend the performer. One person was told he “should not ask for £800. We can’t pay”. At the December meeting the president said this person should not charge for his services and “must make his contribution *as a Nepali*”.

By contrast, and perhaps revealing something of the priorities chosen in staging another culture in a foreign land, through ritual management of visible formal roles, a full professional rate was going to be offered to someone from the Manchester BBC studios to take the role of master of ceremonies, and introduce each act in the cultural programme (an aspiration for locally dominant prestige validation that could be termed ‘Mancritisation’). In the end it was a West Indian woman with a music and stage background, known to a committee member who did this job instead, as a friendly act.

Getting close to the festival date, and with the programme more or less in shape, the festival committee president visited Kathmandu, over the Christmas holiday period, for meetings with the Minister of Culture, and the Tourism Board.

The *Namaste* issue of April 2008 announced the forthcoming festival while marking the death of Sir Edmund Hilary; “the festival continues Sir Hilary’s mission, as it seeks to raise awareness of Nepal and its people’s need, while celebrating the mystery and rich culture of one of the most captivating places on this planet”

But what are the Nepali people’s different needs, of those who are in Britain? One Nepali I have spoken with, who had been a masters student at Manchester university, did not feel welcomed by those with a more permanent footing in the UK. He implied there was a barrier facing people who turn up temporarily from Nepal. Furthermore, there is little evident Janajati presence at the association’s events. Thanks to Yarjung Gurung, who gave a shamanic inauguration for the 2004 festival, he organised for the impressive Tamu Pei Sang group to come for a day to the 2008 festival and take the Town Hall by storm with their dramatic choreography of Gurung dance styles.

It is obvious how the diaspora’s hierarchies are performed in the seating arrangements at the meetings in the police sports centre (photo) with suits and ties sat at tables, and leather jackets milling around at the back.





New Year meal seating hierarchy



Tamu Pei Sangh dance in Great Hall, Manchester Town Hall

## Multicultural Citizens

“if mobile subjects plot and manoeuvre in relation to capital flows, governments also articulate with global capital and entities in complex ways. I want to problematize the popular view that globalization has weakened state power. While capital, population, and cultural flows have indeed made inroads into state sovereignty, the art of government has been highly responsive to the challenges of transnationality” (Aihwa Ong 1999:7)

“If two Nepalis find each other [in another country], there will be three organisations” (Ambassador to UK Murari Raj Sharma)

There was an important speech by the newly appointed ambassador to the New Year meeting of the Himalayan Yeti Association in April 2008. With wit and sharp observations, he was very comfortable with the role of speaking to the congregation at the police sports hall. He made a very positive presentation, in English, about the formation of the provisional government in Kathmandu, and the democratic progress this represented for the country. With hardly a pause he pointed out this was now an excellent opportunity to invest in Nepal’s future, and in particular highlighted the financial returns being made from investing in small hydro-electric ventures. He strongly encouraged events such as the festival to make the British community aware of the local Nepalis, and spoke of the general benefits of getting involved in school governors boards, and health organisations, so that people in local positions of power would come to know about the Nepalis, and if situations arise that require help or advice from local politicians, there is already some recognition from previous points of contact.

For the new ambassador, and many involved in the festival, there was no issue of being any less Nepali by living abroad. Providing a cultural window onto Nepal was recognised as a strategy for local belonging, but what limits were experienced about acceptable cultural images, or political messages? At one point a key committee member was arguing for inviting the biggest names possible to speak at the festival. He was not worried about political repercussions if we were to invite the Dalai Lama, “We don’t care what the Dalai Lama says, we only want him to sell the festival”.

Back in 2004, there had been a concerted attempt to block my wish to show ‘The Killing Terraces’ among other documentary films on the civil war in Nepal, showcased through the biennial ‘Film South Asia’ festival in Kathmandu. Emails came in suggesting this was a partisan, unbalanced view of the Peoples War, and should not be shown. The role of the festival, I was told by one vociferous non-Nepali member, was to promote Nepal, not to detract from its image, and “keep the political situation out of it”. Others argued that the citizens of Manchester include many who would be curious to know more about the background to the shifting global image of Nepal - from Shangri-la trekking destination to Maoist battle-zone. My argument that an emerging, confident journalistic movement in the country was something to be celebrated, was loudly contested in email exchanges. The films were shown, in a side room, keenly watched by many Nepalis for the first time.

A vote did not need to be forced, as the debate was mostly conducted among the non-Nepali members, with the president trying “to keep everyone on the committee happy”. Further interventions to censor the views of Nepal on show came in discussions of appropriate topics for the programme of talks. Admonishments were made by the president to Nepalis, not to think they can “stand up in front of British audiences” and say what they like.

In the 2008 festival, the funding crisis led to another confrontation. What did and did not appear on the final leaflet, who was acknowledged and thanked, and who was not, needed close reading. Certain energies to promote the inclusion of specific elements in the programme were deemed not to warrant mention, as only contributions to the general festival production, not private passions pursued in apparent favour over other options, deserved recognition. As for an expenses claim submitted by one committee member, there was a special meeting called

“Nobody disagrees she hasn’t worked hard...[but] it cannot be on a professional basis...We do appreciate her input. We cannot afford the bill....The Association has taken years to build up its reserves”

The total expenses incurred by the 2008 festival were £10,500 more than incomings. The attempt to raise funds by the volunteer committee had been severely hampered by the committee’s inability to locate credible figures from the previous festival (given the committee’s haphazard record keeping – the old figures were found two weeks before the new festival). The reorganised freelance agent job status of the key interfacier with the Town Hall administration meant he submitted his bill and expenses to the committee for a discrete job of work, which had included applying to the council for the funds to cover his administrative role. This professionalized enclaving within the work of the festival organisation, and over-reliance on one broker to mediate with the Town Hall, hindered the festival management and left others who had dedicated hundreds of hours of work, feeling unfairly situated on the voluntary/professional axis of multiculturalism.

## **Discussion**

In considering the relations of cultural translocation in this chapter, do the Nepalis present a coherent face to the ‘host’ society in an exchange of inter-national regard? Alternatively, how does the shifting locatedness of diaspora unpick the contours of culture and redistribute a sense of belonging? My argument is that Nepalis appear to be quite successful players of the multicultural game for belonging in the ‘integrationist’ political environment of global metropolitan society. By putting an authentic culture on display, they are possibly doing much more: “Cultural continuity appears in and as the mode of cultural change” (Sahlins 1993:19). As Baumann (1992) argues for South Asians in London, the use of cultural symbols is as much for others to recognise and respond to, as for ‘intra-group’ readings.

If the question is asked ‘who is the Manchester festival for?’, the answer has to be a range of people with both dominant and demotic cultural interests (Baumann 1997). When I visited the office of the British Council in Lazimpat in 2007, to distribute information



leaflets about the festival, the council official I spoke to asked the question ‘Why Manchester?’, with a mixture of surprise and possibly disdain. Not high in the affections of people wanting to promote respectable images of touristic England, it is mostly in the national profile for reasons of gun crime, football, rock music, and gay lifestyles. Yet it is a highly globalised city within a region that has experienced a post-colonial re-invention, where the old industrial landscape has given way to a consumption service economy, including hiking and mountaineering in the nearby areas of the Peak District and Lake Districts. In the old mill towns outside Manchester there have been episodes of rioting by disaffected Asian youth. As a beacon of enlightened multicultural tolerance and generosity, Manchester’s council needs to present an image of inclusivity. Thus, the functional happenstance of a political centre looking for disciplined ‘ethnic’ communities to interact with, a constituency of professional multiculturalists, a market of leisure-oriented people many of whom have been on trekking holidays and expeditions to Nepal, all come together in ways that Olds and Thrift (2005:271) have written about in terms of a functionality of happening, a coming together, rather than cause and effect.

The Nepalis who participate and attend, do so on one hand to enjoy the public occasion of *their* culture taking the stage, providing an occasion for British-resident Nepalis to see themselves as a public ‘in the public’, occupying the attention of civic dignitaries, given broadcast space on the media, and additionally, doing so in a way that connects with a large number of non-Nepalis. Just looking at the stalls arranged in the elegant rooms of the town hall, it is obvious how many professional and self-appointed ‘friends of Nepal’ there are, doing voluntary work, enabling development projects, promoting spiritual causes, and marketing tourism. The several thousand people who attended enjoy the colours, sights, films and talks about Nepal, but it is within the embrace of officialdom, surrounded by the solid iconography of old Mancunian burghers and the pictured narratives of great institutional scenes in the history of this global epicentre of industrialism, that the self-confident and co-incidentally new republican members of the Nepali community celebrate their diasporic capacity to be simultaneously of here, and there.

And yet there is a big mediation provided by and for non-Nepalis for the festival. The festival needs ‘crowd-puller’ names, and none of those suggested were Nepali (apart from Prashant Tamang, the Darjeeling pop idol). In the absence of providing a big media star my own role was to provide a set of speakers for the discerning populace (many thanks to Michael Hutt and Charles Ramble), and reveal something of the wealth of knowledge about Nepal among academics to share with the tax-payers who enable this knowledge production. Along with the academics, artists and NGO actors, the figures of Mike Harding, Edmund Hilary, and Doug Scott (more recently Joanna Lumley) can be seen to epitomise a very particular kind of an experience of personal transformation by contact with Nepal. This emotional, intimate, biographically rescripting dimension of the image of Nepal in the eyes of the British public could be heard in the conversations of animated festival visitors, sprinkled with some of them wearing visible marks of identification, from the old British Gurkha emblems, to handbags and headgear bought in Thamel or Phewa Tal.

The selling point of Nepal is a distinct kind of exotic symbolic capital, (made tangible through cheap retail products and tourism services), that enables numbers of non-Nepalis to find points of solidarity through personal narratives of peak-ascents, of spiritual, military, scientific, and educational journeys, and simply pleasurable association. Photogenic landscapes and celebrity self-publicity against the backdrop of picturesque traditional people sell in popular culture. The Manchester Nepalis were not worried about this aspect for the sake of promoting a successful event. For the British public of course there is an added sentimental paternalism derived from the Gurkha relationship (the Liberal Democrat Party leader Nick Clegg asserted if Gurkhas can die for Britain they should be allowed to live in Britain (White 2009)). The Manchester festival aims to hit all these sensibilities, and in the process offer the event as an example of the dream of a multicultural public sphere: for generous and responsive local government fortified by well organised and civically disciplined ethnic communities (Baumann 1995). However, this dream is not so cheap in the end. People who give their energies and time to bring the dream alive for a couple of days are not receiving equal rewards. Some stand to gain prestige, some will receive commercial rates and consultancies, some will gather material for academic papers, some will have received applause, but others worked long hours to pull the strands together, keep the committee up to date, turn promises and offers into real commitments, and manage the difficult interface between regimes of standards acceptable to voluntary organisations, and those expected of professional practice. Each festival has seen an inordinate burden of organisational toil fall on the shoulders of non-Nepali women.

Multiculturalism in the UK is an industry that offers largesse to those communities that will present themselves as organised, and work to fulfil the picture of inter-ethnic harmony – a picture at variance with undesirable aspects of global society, of violence against asylum seekers, and riots against British fascists or police in towns close to Manchester. The performance of Nepali culture is not then politically innocent. Soysal's (1994) argument from other 'ethnic' organisations in Europe is that these diaspora reflect a strong trace of the host society's framework for managing its relationship to 'immigrant' communities, and especially by resources and policy constructions in which cultural diversity is modelled as a beneficial phenomenon, congruent with general civic values. This does not mean that the principles of multiculturalism need to be strongly articulated beyond vague sentiments of respect for difference within shared civic values. Anderson comments that

“even multiculturalism's defenders often have little clue of what it really is, or does. Multiculturalism is not only a heap of colours, it is a machine with cogs that whirr. It not only fuses, but keeps apart. It doesn't so much discriminate as direct a choreography of cultures. Much like a latter-day, benign sort of empire, where all races and cultures play a minor part in the symphony of power” (Anderson 2006.)

While some (e.g. Favell 2003), see multiculturalism as rescuing the nation state, others perceive a different phenomenon: “long-distance nationalism is reconfiguring the way many people understand the relationship between populations and the states that claim to represent them”. After the sway held by nationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which required two world wars and the UN to become hegemonic “a new form of state has emerged that

extends its reach across borders, claiming that its emigrants and their descendants remain an integral and intimate part of their ancestral homeland, even if they are citizens of another state” (Glick-Schiller and Fouron 2002: 357).

All these possibilities need to be considered in situated, ‘everyday’ state practices of multiculturalism, and the interrogative concept of belonging can bring focus and nuance to processes of change that are far from adhering to set types. It is not as if the kinds of transnationalism demonstrated by some Nepalis are reflecting a generic type of transnational actor. In the opening-out for others to gaze at the Manchester festival, the symbolic capital and global branding of Nepal and the Himalaya through Gurkhas, Sherpas and pagodas, but also seeing citizens confronting state power and replacing a monarchy with a republic, contrasts notably with the discussion of transnationalism in Ong’s *Flexible Citizenship* talking of “a border-running Chinese executive with no state loyalty” (1999: 135-6), who readily submit to the governmentality of capital, while plotting all the while to escape state discipline” (1999: 135).

The Nepalis in Manchester rather, are happy to take on the role of hosting the other dispersed members of their national community abroad, and grounding the event in their new-found spectacular temple of civic belonging. Manchester’s resident Nepali community is hardly more than a hundred and fifty people, but the political need from the local state, the self-selected community of interest from the region in Nepal, and the good name in which Nepal is held (despite poverty, politics, and paucity of media coverage) have converged to generate an event of very hybrid manufacture desired by locals and neo-locals. Werbner has rejoined accusations (Barry 2000) of multiculturalism as a conspiracy of state engineering by arguing

multiculturalism is a rather messy local political and bureaucratic negotiated order, responsive to ethnic grassroots pressure, budgetary constraints and demands for redistributive justice. It is bottom-up rather than top-down. This also means that there is no single ‘just’ blueprint for multiculturalism, even in a single country and certainly between countries... In different countries, multiculturalism refers to different struggles, depending on minority demands for recognition and a share of state or local state budgets. Beyond the struggles for local recognition, however, we need to recognise that multiculturalism has also become a global movement ... (Werbner 2005: 761)

Within the history of Nepalis living in Britain, there is an important interplay of rhetorics about national conviviality, compatibility and mutual respect, which can be genealogically tracked back to the mid-nineteenth century relationship to the British state. New terms of recognition and symbolic capital of contemporary value is projected through culture on display. What goes on display can become a matter of anthropological curiosity, even contrivance. However, I could not contrive the presence at the festival of other Nepalis in the UK, for whom this festive display represents an aspiration for visible citizenship they cannot entertain on account of the scrutinising of their residence documents this could invite and their marginal ethnicity among Nepalis. For such people who have little affective belonging to the state of Nepal, a visit to the Dalai Lama’s

public audience in Scotland provided a greater incentive to take a couple of days off work than attend the elite-flavoured event in Manchester.

## **Conclusion**

The term 'belonging' appears in Modood's book on multiculturalism to help navigate the space between formal legalistic notions of citizenship, and old ideas of culture that cling to pre-immigration notions of national identity in Europe. It brings an affective dimension to understand how diaspora communities can develop positive relationships to European national cultural life beyond civic rights and economic benefits. As with much multiculturalist literature, Modood's primary concern is with the relationship of Muslim people to European societies, and the normative potential for overcoming stigmatised and conflict-laden perceptions. By contrast the Nepali diaspora case appears to offer an unthreatening vision of multicultural integration with pleasure at the fore. There is more of a two-way traffic between ethnic British and ethnic Nepalis living in Britain. With the entrepreneurial spirit of northern England, and its predilection for public congregation, multiculturalism has provided a platform for an international consumption of difference brought to the doorstep, and a rationale for civic repopulation of urban Europe.

The Nepali festival in Manchester persuaded me of the need to see multiculturalism in the context of the dynamics of particular cities and relationships. 'Why Manchester?' was the bemused question from the British Council official about the location of the festival. It is a very good question, and already begins to explain that a dynamic based on a very different political and social landscape in Northwest England lent an impetus to the city council to demonstrate it would part-fund and encourage the local Nepalis and their friends and associates to make a show of their belonging to Manchester, at the same time as their affective belonging to Nepal. Multiculturalism is not the same thing in London and Manchester due to regional political history, but to dig beneath the encompassing discourse of multiculturalism as policy for managing societies of migration, the questions posed by belonging abroad point to demotic struggles in principles of commercial rationality and cultural commitment that leave little room for Janajati migrants who do not find a welcome place in national narratives. Multiculturalism glitters with colourful variety in the supermarkets and local government brochures, as a reinvented form of consumption and of political legitimacy, but between its happy images of staged conviviality, its aspirations for encompassing diversity are limited by the national brands on offer, its potential for giving recognition by segregating communities, and neglect of demotic opportunities for belonging that are not reliant on donning national dress.

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